

The Paul-Henri and Erika Bourguignon Photographic Archives
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Port-au-Prince
(May 1947-August 1948)

En route to Haiti ([UH000](#), [001](#), [002](#))

Paul Bourguignon arrived in Haiti in May 1947, having traveled from Le Havre to Martinique on board the French luxury liner *Le Colombie*. The boat had been converted into a military hospital ship and had not yet returned to its prewar character. It was crowded with emigrants from many different European countries, most of whom hoped to relocate in South America. From Martinique Bourguignon proceeded to Port-au-Prince, with stops on the way in Guadeloupe and the Dominican Republic.

In Port-au-Prince, Bourguignon settled at the Hotel Excelsior on the Champ de Mars and soon began to take photographs.

The city and its surroundings ([PH003](#), [004](#), [005](#), [006](#), [007](#), [008](#), [009](#), [010](#), [011](#), [012](#), [013](#), [014](#), [015](#), [016](#), [017](#), [018](#), [019](#), [020](#), [021](#), [022](#), [023](#), [024](#), [025](#), [026](#), [027](#), [028](#), [029](#), [030](#))

Port-au-Prince is located on the Gulf of Gonâve, named for the island at its center. The city was founded by the French, in the 18th century, as the capital and principal port of the colony of St. Domingue. In 1944--the most recent date for which US Government estimates were available in 1948--Port-au-Prince was reported to have a population of 125,000. Unofficial estimates in 1948 set the total closer to 200,000. The increase, by all accounts, was due to a continuous migration from rural areas to the city. This long term-trend was accelerated, on the one hand, by fragmentation and alienation of rural lands and on the other, by the availability of service jobs in the city. This included quasi-adoptions of child servants (*ti moun, restavec*) by middle and upper class families.

Situated in a shallow bowl, the city is surrounded by hills to the South and East, with exits to a narrow coastal plain to the West and North. Originally, well-to-do families built their houses near the harbor where government offices and business activities are located. As in other Latin American cities, the poorer people increasingly populated the hillsides. The wealthier then began moving up higher into the hills as roads were constructed, first to Pétionville and then, by 1930, to Kenscoff. The city and its surroundings clearly reflected the deep divisions of the society as a whole.

In 1947-8 only one tourist hotel had been constructed at a somewhat higher altitude. Truman Capote (1948:120), who visited Haiti for some weeks in 1948, described the view, with some artistic license, from the American-owned Olaffson hotel:

“From the terrace where in the mornings I sit...I can see the mountains sliding blue and bluer into the harbor bay; below there is the whole of Port-au-Prince, a town whose colors are paled into peeling historical pastels by centuries of sun: sky-gray cathedral, hyacinth fountain, green-rust fence. To the left, and like a city within this other, there is a great chalk garden of baroque stone: here is the cemetery.”

Bourguignon, in his novel *The Greener Grass*, writes of the city as seen from a loftier altitude, as the narrator's plane takes off:

“In the last flash, I saw the city again. All the streets, the markets, the houses. The Champ-de-Mars and the presidential palace, all white, like a newly painted toy. And now the bay, as blue and deep as a Norwegian fjord, and all around the mountains covered with an extravagant vegetation of the most sumptuous green. The entire island seemed of the most delicate emerald green, with a few yellow stripes for the roads and some white dots for the buildings” (p. 18).

[Fifty some years later, with the country's disastrous state of erosion, it is difficult to remember what now seems unimaginable splendor.]

Bourguignon's photographs show this view, both in broad expanse and in some detail.

The largest structures seen from the surrounding hillsides are the impressive presidential palace near the Champ-de-Mars and, close by, the military barracks, the Catholic Cathedral, the massive Iron Market, and the large cemetery. The American Embassy was housed in a large rented villa on one corner of the Champ-de Mars. The style of some older houses owed much to French tropical colonial architecture of the 19th century—wooden structures with arcades and balconies, shutters and unglazed windows. Even in the center of the city there were open sewers and houses were built on masonry bases that raised them above street level. On the steep hillsides, houses flanked rutted gullies where torrential rains had washed out dirt streets.

The city is surrounded by hillside slums ([PH601](#), [602](#), [603](#), [604](#), [605](#), [606](#), [607](#), [608](#), [609](#), [610](#), [611](#), [612](#), [613](#), [614](#)^{*}, [615](#), [616](#), [617](#), [618](#), [619](#), [620](#), [621](#), [622](#), [623](#), [624](#), [625](#), [626](#), [627](#), [628](#), [629](#), [630](#), [631](#), [632](#), [633](#), [634](#), [635](#), [636](#), [637](#), [638](#), [639](#), [640](#), [641](#), [642](#), [643](#), [644](#), [645](#), [646](#), [647](#), [648](#), [649](#), [650](#), [651](#), [652](#), [653](#), [654](#), [656](#), [657](#), [658](#)[†], [659](#), [660](#), [661](#), [662](#), [663](#)) of varying degrees of poverty. There are, practically speaking, no streets, only rutted passages that become deeper with each tropical rainstorm. There are open sewers, bridged by planks at each house. Many houses are raised from street level by stone bases.

From his location at the Hotel Excelsior, a family-owned and operated hotel-pension patronized primarily by Haitian travelers, Bourguignon had a broad view of the Champ-de-Mars—the parade grounds—and surroundings. He took pictures of the central streets of the city but avoided the elite homes, which seemed of little interest to him. They were the stuff of tourist brochures, he thought. It was the life on the streets, the port, the market activities, the festivals--all amid pervasive poverty-- that attracted his attention.

Markets and commerce:

The port, surrounded by markets, served both foreign and local trade and transportation. The principal exports were coffee (small scale independent producers), sugar cane

^{*} Photo no. 614 available in negative only; negatives not yet scanned. Contact Rare Books & Manuscripts at The Ohio State University.

[†] Photo no. 658 available in negative only; negatives not yet scanned.

(HASCO), and bananas (Standard Fruit, Brown and Root). From the coastal regions to the north and west of the city, these agricultural products are brought by rail to the port for export. Freighters plied the shipping lanes from the southern Caribbean to the east coast of the U.S., carrying goods and some passengers. Occasional cruise ships stopped at the port for a day. Coastal traffic, along the northern shore as well as traffic from La Gonâve, however, was largely based on the use of sailboats transporting passengers and goods. Given the poor conditions of roads or their total absence, these provided the major means of transport for building materials (gravel, sand), fish and seafood, and locally produced goods as well as people.

The port area is also the starting point of converted trucks (*camion*) that serve as buses for out of town travel and transport of goods.

“The means of public transportation, called *camion*, are, as their name implies, trucks rather than buses. They run at rare intervals without a schedule. The inexperienced traveler may be pleased when, at 6 a.m., a partially filled truck leaves the Port-au-Prince market place, near the port, to proceed to the desired location. As the vehicle slowly moves along the road leading to the city limits, passengers and driver will call out the destination to passers by, in an attempt to collect passengers and fill the truck. If, on reaching the city limits, the truck is insufficiently filled, the driver will turn back and the procedure will be continued until there are enough passengers to make the trip worth while” (EB: edited field notes).

As the capital and largest city, Port-au-Prince was and remains the center of political and economic activity, but also of social life, religion, and the arts. The festivals seen in the life of the streets are Carnival and pre-Easter Rara. There are Catholic Churches and shrines, but also an Episcopal Cathedral and churches of various smaller denominations and evangelical groups. Watch Tower and Bahai were represented in the city.

The later 1940s were a period of active growth in the Haitian art movement, especially in connection with the American sponsored Centre d’Art. Paul Bourguignon was in contact

with this group (E. Bourguignon 2004), and collected items of Haitian art and related objects and photographs ([UH503](#), [504](#), [505](#), [506](#), [507](#), [508](#), [509](#), [510](#), [511](#), [512](#)).

References:

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